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ABSTRACT

The intricate quilt pattern of child language development can be pieced together from the numerous swatches of each child's language fabric which have been gathered by watching, looking, and listening when young children write. The necessity of watching, looking, and listening is demonstrated by the example of a preschooler's verbal protocol which accompanied the writing of a story. The language researchers who try to look at children's language by pulling children (and their language) out of context, will have only threads to look at. Adopting a qualitative, contextualized approach will lead to a better understanding of the complicated and elusive phenomena of the development of child language. (RS)

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Why We Need to Watch, Look, and Listen When Young Children Write: What We Can Learn from Them About Their Language

Margaret McIntosh

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Figure 1. Text of Kelli's Christmas tree story. [One day a long long time ago there was a Christmas tree. A Christmas tree was gone for ever said the tree. Someone walked up to the tree and she said you are alive.]

I would never have known what Kelli's story said if I had not had the opportunity to watch, look, and listen while she composed it. Kelli was one of the nine five- and six-year-olds on whom I focused my attention for a year-long research project. Knowing the content of Kelli's story, however, yields only part of the information available about her as a writer and a language user. There is so much more to this story than just the words that comprise it. In this article, I will attempt to set forth the "more" that was

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available to me as a researcher. In the process, I hope to demonstrate the necessity for those who work with young children, and who are therefore interested in their language, to watch the children when they write, to look for explanations for how and why and what they write, and to listen for the information provided orally by the children as they write.

Kelli is a marvelous child from whom to learn about children as writers and language users. First of all, she writes a great deal. Secondly, she is quite verbal throughout the composing process, thereby providing "running commentary" as she creates her story. It is almost as if she turns on the "sound" of her brain as it is working.

In the five minutes that it took Kelli to write her Christmas tree story (Figure 1), as I sat next to her with notebook, pen, and tape recorder in hand, this is what I heard:

Kelli: "A long long t-ime a-g-o time ago. Kelli. One time one time long a a long long time ago, the the the uh hold it, the the er- there wu-us was a ch-ch-k-k-r-i-i-s-m-christma-is- ch-ch---Do you know what makes a ch?" she asked me.

McIntosh: "What word are you writing?"

Kelli: "Christmas tree"

McIntosh: "Christmas tree, christmas tree"

Kelli: "tree, tree"

McIntosh: "How do you spell tree?"

Kelli: "I don't want to do it tu-ree! a tree."

McIntosh: "Tree, tree, tree, tree, what sound do you hear?"

Kelli: "ch-ch, I guess h. tree. a tree was was gone gone? for-or-forev-ev-ever. ssss-said the tree. sssumwu-someone walked u-u-up to to to the the tr-tre-tree tree and and and and and she said she said said said she said yu-ou you are alive live you are alive! That's all--what she said."

This particular literacy event, that is, this situation involving a piece of writing that was integral to Kelli's and my interaction and interpretation (Heath, 1982), can be analyzed in several ways, any one of which provides information about the nature of Kelli's language development. For example, it could be analyzed in any of the following ways:

(1) as a single literacy event involving Kelli;

(2) as one of many literacy events involving Kelli;

(3) as one of many literacy events occurring in Kelli's classroom in which some or all of her classmates are also involved;

(4) as one literacy event displayed against a backdrop of all young children who write.

For the purpose of demonstrating the richness of information that is available when one watches, looks, and

listens to a child's language in context, I will analyze one small portion of Kelli's Christmas tree story and the literacy event surrounding it. I will consider this particular segment of a single literacy event as one of a whole series of events involving Kelli as a writer (#2 above). In this way, I intend to make it apparent that those of us who work with young children must adopt a stance that considers child language contextually (rather than atomistically) in order to learn that which the children have to teach us.

Kelli began her Christmas tree story 'A long long time ago, there was a...'[1] (Figure 2)

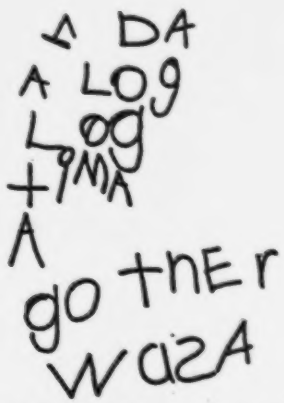

Figure 2. Partial text from Kelli's Christmas tree story

As can be seen from Kelli's story and from the transcription of what she said while writing, Kelli used what she knew about sounds to spell the words she did not have in her instant spelling repertoire. As she continued with her opening line, it seems that Kelli first intended to write '...there was a tree' but before she wrote 'tree', she

decided to put 'Christmas' first. After spelling 'Christmas' [cresmes], she again tried to sound out 'tree'. She said, "/ch/, /ch/." Apparently, this sound was not one that Kelli readily had a symbol for, so being resourceful, she asked me, "Do you know what makes a /ch/?"

When she asked that question, I had a pretty good idea that she was planning to spell 'tree," but I tried not to make an assumption lest my doing so might eliminate important information, so I asked her, "What word are you writing?" (I also did this because I knew that virtually every sound in the English language can be represented in more than one way). When Kelli responded, "Christmas tree," I said, very slowly, "Christmas tree, Christmas tree," making sure that I enunciated the consonant at the beginning of 'tree' distinctly. Kelli repeated, "Tree, tree" in a rather impatient voice, implying "TREE--TREE--Are you deaf, woman?" So then I asked, "How do you spell tree?" again drawing the word out so that she could hear the /t/ at the beginning. Quite exasperated by this point, Kelli said, "I don't want to do it /tuh-ree/! A tree!"

It was at this juncture that I finally realized that the sound Kelli was asking for, /ch/, was indeed the sound heard at the beginning of 'tree'. The phonetic spelling of 'tree' is not /trē/, especially in rapid speech or as in the phrase, 'Christmas tree.' I had been using what I knew about traditional orthography and was therefore deaf to the

evidence Kelli was providing of her phonological awareness. According to Ehri (1984), the language knowledge of beginners

> includes a lexicon of words acquired from their experience with speech. The lexicon is comprised of word units having several identities. Each word has a phonological identity, that is, how the word sounds and is articulated. Each word has a syntactic identity, how the word functions in sentences. Each has a semantic identity, what the word might mean in various contexts. In the course of learning to read, another identity is added to the lexicon: an alphabetic image of the word. This image is integrated with the other identities to form a unit in lexical memory (p. 123).

As Ehri and Wilce (1982) point out, it seems that the alphabetic image affects conceptualization of the phonemic structure of a word and may actually override the sounds one hears. Certainly, this was the case here; I could not imagine why Kelli was asking for /ch/ when I knew what she wanted was a 't'.

Wanting to verify my hypothesis, I asked Kelli, "What sound do you hear at the beginning?" As expected, her response was, "/ch/, /ch/." She decided that /ch/ was spelled 'h' (no thanks to the nearby adult) and proceeded to spell 'tree' [hre] (Figure 3).

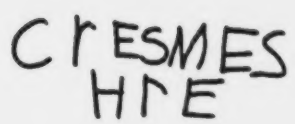

Figure 3. Partial text of Kelli's Christmas tree story.

In her two subsequent uses of 'tree', Kelli, without hesitation, wrote [hre]. It seemed that Kelli had arrived at a spelling for 'tree' that made sense to her and because Kelli had an awareness that spelling was neither haphazard nor capricious, she maintained consistent orthography throughout her story.

Part of my understanding of the literacy development evidenced in her Christmas tree story was informed by my previous observations and interactions with Kelli in her kindergarten classroom. I recognized, for example, that the awareness of orthographic consistency exhibited in December represented growth from October. I knew this because one day in October, I had observed her as she was writing a story about four birds. Although she had written [birds] at the beginning of the story, when she got ready to write 'bird nest' later in the story, she was not sure how to spell it and seemed surprised when I pointed out that she had already spelled it once and that it was going to be spelled the same.

From both the October and December encounters with Kelli, as well as subsequent ones, I knew that she was not

cognizant of the fact that, in English, a sound can be represented by more than one letter. For example, on another occasion, Kelli asked, "How do you make a /er/?" I asked her what word she was writing. With an exasperated expression, she said, "/er/, just /er/." When I persisted, she said, "Hurt," implying with her tone and expression, "What difference does it make?"

Much of the rigidity of her belief was attributable to the commercial phonics-based reading program and phonics-based writing program that were part of the curriculum in her classroom. Each letter was taught as "making" one sound and each sound was taught as being "made" by one letter. For example, in this program, children were taught that the letter 'c' makes a /k/, not that 'c' may make a /k/ or a /s/ and not that /k/ may be made by a 'k' or a 'c'. Kelli was not a fluent reader prior to beginning kindergarten so she did not have discrepant cases from her own reading experience to cause her to question these rigid rules about sound/symbol correspondence. As the year progressed, though, she did acquire a different sense of reading and writing, but also of "school reading and writing."

Watching and listening as Kelli wrote her [cresmes hre] story provided information regarding what she knew about the conventions of written language as well as what she did not know. For example, based on my observations of and

interactions with Kelli during the composing of her story, this is some of what I learned:

What Kelli knew	Evidence
1. Kelli knew that words were written left to right.	1. Essentially all her words were written left to right.
2. Kelli knew that there should be spaces between words (i.e., the unit "word" exists --although she was not yet cognizant of all units which constitute a word).	2. She put a space between the two words in the phrases [1 da] and [go ther] but not between the two words in the phrase [wotup] ('walked up').
3. Kelli knew that lines of writing go from the top of the page to the bottom of the page.	3. She had essentially three columns on her page, and in each column, Kelli had written her words and lines from the top of the page to the bottom.
4. Kelli knew that certain letters represented certain sounds.	4. She spelled /d/, [d]; /t/, [t]; /w/, [w], and so on.

5. Kelli knew that words were spelled the same each time they were written.	5. 'tree' was spelled [hre] each of the three times it was written; 'long' was spelled [log] both times it was written.
6. Kelli knew that stories had ritual beginnings.	6. She began her story, 'One day a long long time ago...' (she said "One day" even though she did not write it).
7. Kelli knew that written language should make sense.	7. Kelli reread her own text; her completed text did, indeed, make sense.

On the other hand, consider the following clues regarding what Kelli did <u>not</u> yet know:

What Kelli did not know	Evidence
1. Kelli did not know that if one was going to write in columns, then the columns go from left to right, sequentially.	1. Kelli's three columns could be numbered, in terms of her story, as 1, 3, 2.

2. Kelli did not know that some words were not spelled like they sound.	2. he spelled 'time' as [tim], 'gone' as [gon], 'to' as [toow], and so on.
3. Kelli did not know that punctuation conventions exist.	3. There were no punctuation marks of any kind in Kelli's story.

In addition to knowing what Kelli did and did not know about the conventions of written language based on my observations of her as a reader and writer, I was also privy to how she came to know some of what she did; I had been in her learning environment and had witnessed explanations, questions, lessons, materials, directions, and teacher-child and child-child interactions. Although I have pulled out a minute segment of Kelli's school experiences to explicate for this article (i.e., one portion of the literacy event surrounding one composing session), I also attended to Kelli's language as it was occurring as <u>part</u> of the larger context of the classroom environment, thereby rendering a cogent picture of her abilities.

Lindfors (1987) uses a metaphor to describe looking at an example of child language. She likens it to stopping a film to look at a particular frame. "In the particular frame that is the example, you cannot see the dynamic child-and-context interaction; the ongoing process; but each

example reflects that process" (p. 158). The depth and breadth of what can be learned about child language by figuratively stopping a film to view a frame--but considering that frame as part of the whole film--is in sharp contrast to what can be learned about child language by simply administering one of the myriad of language testing instruments available or by having Kelli perform certain language "tasks." In order to find out what children know about language, we must observe them using that language in context.

If we try to learn about children's language without considering who the child is, what is happening as the child completes a particular task, when and where the situation is occurring, why the child might have performed or behaved as he or she did, and how other factors may have influenced the performance/behavior, our "results" are very likely going to yield a distorted, partial view of what is actually going on in children's language. Those of us who espouse qualitative research as the appropriate way to learn about children's language work from the following basic assumption:

> ...children's language is woven into the fabric of the event that is occuring as the language is used. Just as pulling a single thread from a cloth changes one's perceptions of that thread, separating language from the context in which it occurs distorts its nature and obscures its communicative function. Descriptions of

> an individual child's language can be meaningful only when framed by the events and purposes that engender the language (Lund and Duchan, 1983, xi; emphasis added).

If one envisions the nature of an individual child's language development as a multi-colored, multi-patterned bolt of fabric that is hidden from the view of all but the child, then the only hope teachers and researchers have of constructing an image of that bolt of cloth is to discover various swatches of the cloth to piece together. Looking for and finding separate threads of language through research that ignores the contexts in which language occurs is not useful in the quest for constucting the bolt of fabric.

Summary

It is clear that my research with Kelli provided me with numerous swatches of her language fabric. My research with the other young children involved in this study yielded information on numerous swatches of their language fabric, as well. The swatches I am able to find will eventually be pieced together with the swatches found by other researchers so that ultimately, we may construct the intricate quilt pattern of child language development. The language researchers who try to look at children's language by pulling children (and their language) out of context, will

have only threads to look at--none of which will be identifiable as belonging to the quilt--and none of which will add significantly to the pattern.

Child language development is one of the most complicated and elusive phenomena being investigated. Studying children who are at the stage of language learning that borders on adult competence is extremely fruitful in elucidating this phenomenon (Chomsky, 1969). Not only does child language development deserve to be intensely and qualitatively studied, but it will never yield its secrets if it is not so studied (i.e., using whatever time and techniques will allow for an investigation that not only retains the context, but depends on it for information).

Teachers and other child language researchers have a long way to go toward understanding child language development. Loban (1986, p. 614) stated, "If a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, no one is at present out of danger in the study of language." Adopting a qualitative, contextualized approach to the study of child language will lead us to safer territory.

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[1], ' indicates conventional spelling/orthography
[ ] indicates Kelli's spelling
/ / indicates "the sound of"

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